

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE BLOGGERS' ROUNDTABLE WITH COLONEL JON LEHR, COMMANDER, 4TH STRYKER BRIGADE COMBAT TEAM, 2ND INFANTRY DIVISION, MULTI-NATIONAL DIVISION-NORTH TOPIC: UPDATE ON MILITARY OPERATIONS IN DIYALA PROVINCE MODERATOR: JACK HOLT, CHIEF OF NEW MEDIA OPERATIONS, OFFICE OF THE SECRETARY OF DEFENSE PUBLIC AFFAIRS TIME: 12:30 P.M. EDT DATE: WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 17, 2007

Copyright (c) 2007 by Federal News Service, Inc., Ste. 500 1000 Vermont Avenue, NW, Washington, DC 20005, USA. Federal News Service is a private firm not affiliated with the federal government. No portion of this transcript may be copied, sold or retransmitted without the written authority of Federal News Service, Inc. Copyright is not claimed as to any part of the original work prepared by a United States government officer or employee as a part of that person's official duties. For information on subscribing to the FNS Internet Service, please visit <http://www.fednews.com> or call(202)347-1400

COL. LEHR: Hello, Jack. It's Colonel Jon Lehr.

MR. HOLT: Colonel Lehr, thank you for joining us this afternoon. Sorry for the trouble -- we've been having some connectivity problems -- but I appreciate you taking the time to be with us and thank you very much.

Do you have an opening statement for us, sir?

COL. LEHR: Yeah, I sure do.

First, to begin with I want to welcome you. It's good talking to you all. I'm calling from Taji, Iraq, which is directly north of Baghdad. I'd like to make this brief opening statement and then I guess we'll open it up for questions. My battle space is just north of Baghdad and sits at the confluence of three different provinces: Baghdad province, Salahuddin and Diyala. I base operations from here at Taji, though I do have units living and working from FOB Warhorse, which is near Baqubah. The brigade operates in and around the towns of Conbonysad (sp), Husseiniyat, Rushadiya, Taji, Mushada and Tarmiyah. The eastern side of our area of operations is primarily Sunni, although the largest city, Conbonysad (sp), is about 50 percent Shi'a. The largest threat in that area, however, is al Qaeda.

The middle or central portion of our area of operation is predominately Shi'a, stretching from the edges of Baghdad due north along the Tigris River into our area. The most notable population center is Husseiniyat, which has over 600,000 population -- the vast majority is Shi'a. Due west of Husseiniyat is a small Sunni enclave called Rushadiya. The largest threat in Husseiniyat is Shi'a extremists, usually affiliated with JAM special groups that have splintered from Jaish al-Mahdi militia. And then there's also a Sunni resistance organization or element faction in the Rushadiya area. Sometimes we lump them under al Qaeda, but I think they're mainly just Sunni projectionists or Sunni insurgents.

Now, finally, our western sector is primarily a Sunni population and it centers on Mushada, Tarmiyah and here in Taji. Again, the most dangerous and predominant threat in the west is al Qaeda. In Conbanysad (sp) -- going back over to the east side of the battle space -- our units there continue to press after AQI in the lower Diyala river valley and around KBS Conbanysad (sp) The local leaders in KBS had a milestone, attending their first Diyala provincial

meeting in months in Baqubah. This has been a positive step forward in reintegrating KBS into the provincial governance system.

In and around Husseiniyat and Rushadiya, the reconciliation between Sunni and Shi'a sheiks has been promising. Both sides appear genuine in their efforts and eager to reach a solution. Our forces there balance the reconciliation effort, while constantly maintaining pressure on both the Jaish al-Mahdi special groups and then some of the Sunni rejectionists that continue to threaten the people in the area.

In the area around Tarmiyah, which is in the west side, west of the Tigris River, IED events have been reduced by over 80 percent. To give you context, we're probably very close to 1,000 IED experiences -- somewhere well over 900 right now in the area. I think the first 500 to 600 we experienced in the first three months in the battle space. And then you had probably 200 in the next three months and then over the last month it has dropped significantly. So we're very encouraged by that. Key offensive operations continue, primarily in the form of intelligence driven raids and counter IED ambushes. Most significantly during this time, the capture of the sixth member of the Albadrami (sp) Finance Network significantly diminished AQI's resources capability. I won't go into the details on this line, but this is a significant financier network -- financier and also weapons facilitation. Recently, our forces captured the HVI that has been responsible for trying to destabilize the awakening in the Tarmiyah area and assassinated a local sheik that has been assisting in this endeavor.

So I guess in summary that's a quick overview of my area of operations and I'll be glad to field some questions now.

MR. HOLT: All right, sir. Thank you very much.

Andrew Lubin -- you were first online, so why don't you get us started here.

Q Great. Colonel, Andrew Lubin from U.S. Calvary ON Point. We appreciate you taking the time for us to talk with you today.

Sir, I guess the news from your area came out yesterday with the Associated Press that the 3rd Brigade or the 1st Calvary Division is leaving and not going to be replaced. Our understanding was things were kinetic in your area still. So this is, I guess, very good news. Can you talk about it a bit, please?

COL. LEHR: You came in -- some of your question was broken, but let me brief you back to make sure I understand your question. You were making an assertion based on what you read in the news that we're moving and replacing 3-1 Cav. over in Diyala. Is that correct?

Q Correct. The news --

COL. LEHR: Is that the first part of your question?

Q Yeah, yeah, correct. It says that the 3rd Brigade/1st Cav.'s not leaving --

COL. LEHR: And then --

Q -- or is leaving.

COL. LEHR: Yes. And you're suggesting that that is good news?

Q Correct.

COL. LEHR: Is that the question?

Q Yes, correct. And asked -- the news is just brief articles. We're hoping you can expand on it.

COL. LEHR: Yeah. Well, I do -- I do think that's good news. I just had to understand the context of your question. To back up to what we're doing, as I suggested, we are currently in the confluence of three provinces: Baghdad, Salahuddin and western Diyala. We were placed here -- our forces were arrayed here for a specific purpose. And that was, during the surge, the surge is -- one of the purposes of the surge was to be able to amass enough combat power to take control of Baghdad from the extremists and also to place combat forces out in the belts that supported the extremist activity going on in Baghdad. We were a key element in what is referred to as the northern belt, and that's why they placed us in a position that maybe is a bit counterintuitive, because it's not aligned with a particular province. We had several boundaries -- governance boundaries in our area, but that was specifically enemy focused. We have done well. The brigade has done well in routing out the extremists.

And now to get to your question: Yes, I do think this is good news, because I believe at the tactical level the surge is accomplishing what it's supposed to. We have pushed the enemy out of the northern belt. I mean, I don't want to paint the picture that it's, you know, a stroll in the park anymore.

No, it's still a dangerous environment, but it is significantly more secure than it was just a month or two ago. And now, we are able to -- 3-1 is about to depart and as you suggest, there is not another surge brigade coming in behind it. We are moving over there to take the larger portion of the mission set, which is the remainder of the Diyala province, which is absolutely huge. It's about the size of Maryland, to give you a word picture.

So -- I'm sorry I was a bit long winded there, but I believe it is a success story. I feel, based on my battle space and what we've accomplished, that the tactical purpose behind the surge is working and now we're able to expand further out concentric circles away from Baghdad. Over.

Q Okay. If I could follow up then, quickly, that you're pretty confident with you IAs and IPs can handle it with 3rd Brigade pulls out then?

COL. LEHR: I do -- I can't answer that question. I'm not trying to avoid the question. I just am not living -- I'm not living that battle space over there. That's 5th IA and several, several districts and directorates of police over there. I'm not as familiar with that area. I am -- I can comment on the current battle space that I'm in. We're making progress every day with Iraqi security forces.

The Grey Wolf team over there -- 3-1 Cav -- that will replace them could answer that question far better than I could, unfortunately, right now.

Q Okay, great. Well, thank you. I appreciate it.

MR. HOLT: Okay.

David Axe.

COL. LEHR: Sure.

MR. HOLT: Sir, thanks for taking the time to speak to us.

So -- by the way, this is David Axe with the Aviation Week Group. So you say you've pushed extremist elements out of the northern belt, but can't they just come back once there's a reduction of U.S. forces in the area?

COL. LEHR: Yeah, I think they could. When I say pushed out, we have severely disrupted their operations. Are there still elements -- trace elements of them around? A rhetorical question -- I'll answer that: I think there are. But we've been pursuing a three tenet or a three-pronged strategy now since arrival here in Iraq about six months ago. That is: one, erode the insurgents' resources; two, disintegrate the insurgents capability. And I'll define that as decapitating the head of the monster -- focusing on the leadership of the cells, the leadership of the extremist organizations, decapitating it -- taking the head off; and then three, separating the insurgent from his base of support, which is the population.

In my opinion, the first two -- erosion of resources and disintegration of the insurgent capability -- leads to the third. And we did that by precision, intel-driven operations. We have been very successful targeting extremist leaders and taking them off the battlefield. And then, tied to intelligence-driven operations, is finding the resources -- denying them the resources to prosecute the fight: ammunition, weapons, terrain. All of those things that allow the enemy to have an advantage over us, we are actively trying to take them away.

So, now let me tie that to the third point, which is separating the insurgent from his base of support, the population. Once the people have seen that we are capable of providing a secure environment, it's amazing how they have come forward and said, "We're glad you're here. We're tired of," for example, "al Qaeda, and now we feel safe that we can take and participate in our own security." They want to do that. But they have been extremely intimidated prior to this and prior to several success stories that we've had, and they were unwilling to do that. It's human nature. They were scared for their lives, essentially.

So I think, to go back to answering your question, can they come back? Yes, they can. And that's why we've got to continue to create the conditions for Iraqi security forces to continue to develop for the concerned local citizens to become part of the Iraqi security force system, particularly Iraqi police, becoming Iraqi police; creating time and space so that the governance or the government side of the equation can take root; all of these things. So I think we've got to keep pressure on them. That's the bottom line, and I think it addresses your question.

Q Now, more on that point, if you don't mind me following up. You, in your -- you said the population has come forward and said, "We're glad you're here. We're tired of al Qaeda." But in your earlier description of the threats in your AO, you describe actually three different groups -- Sunni rejectionists and Shi'a extremists, in addition to al Qaeda. And those other two groups, the

Shi'a extremists and the Sunni rejections, seem to me to be something that's more of a homegrown resistance rather than a highly extremist, small, terrorist-leaning kind of cellular organization.

So have you seen the massive turnaround that would be required for the population to reject those homegrown militia-type resistance groups?

COL. LEHR: Yeah. There's actually -- your question is two parts. Based on the threat that you just mentioned, you're exactly right. I would say west of the river, it's almost entirely al Qaeda, west of the Tigris River; the Tarmia Qada (ph), which, in the context I'm using it in, is Tarmia County, so to speak.

East of the river, in Rashadiyah area, which is a fairly small area -- it's probably 10 kilometers by 10 kilometers, six miles by six miles, I consider that mainly disenchanted Sunnis. And I think we are getting at that threat right now. What they were doing was they were attacking us with IEDs significantly; some direct fire, not much, but mainly IEDs and a little bit of indirect fire. Plus they were constantly targeting the Iraqi police, which were predominantly Shi'a, on the edges of Rashadiyah.

So the way we're approaching this more is to -- or the way we're approaching this is by engaging these Sunni leaders. I'm not talking in a lethal sense or a kinetic sense, but I'm talking in non-lethal engagements, because we recognize that they have been the forgotten ones there, so to speak, in a predominantly Shi'a-led government in that area, local government. And they had a lot of legitimate concerns.

So I think, in the truest sense, this was reconciliation. We've gone to the table with these rejectionists and said, "Hey, we understand, and maybe we can learn from some of the mistakes here that we need to bring you into the political process. We need to take care of you from an essential service point in this area. And your voice will be heard." And since we've done that, the amount of attacks have gone down significantly in that area.

Now, to segue to your next question about the final threat is what we refer to as JAM special groups or Shi'a extremists. I see indications that they are being supported in our area -- I'll speak only for my area -- they're being supported by Iran, the Iranians, particularly Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps, Qods Force guys.

I personally believe that they are training the JAM special groups or splinter groups in my area and they are resourcing them with weapons because of the type of weapons we're exposed to -- EFPs, certain other JAM signature items, the rockets, et cetera. And we took the same approach with them that we did with al Qaeda, and that is targeting their leadership and dismantling their leadership and their cellular structure; very similar to al Qaeda. They operate a lot of the same ways in terms of cellular networks, EFP-IED networks, et cetera. So we've been actively attacking their leadership and dismantling it. And we've seen, in effect, a perfect example, Husseinayat. Husseinayat is a 600,000 to 650,000 -- has a population of 600,000 to 650,000 people, predominantly Shi'a, about 10 kilometers north of Sadr City or Baghdad. And we had quite a problem there for a while, being attacked with EFPs, direct fire, et cetera.

We conducted an operation, began targeting their leadership, engaged them non-lethally, addressed their concerns at the Husseinayat governmental

level, the city government level. And now I won't say it's a model city, but the security situation there is far improved.

So I go back. I keep hearkening back to the strategy of eroding resources, disintegrating capability, separating the insurgent from base of support. And it appears to be working. I am very confident that we're making a lot of progress.

So to go back to your question about the other two forms of leadership, yeah, it's not just strictly al Qaeda. We have some senior rejectionists and we also have the Shi'a extremist organizations. But we're generally approaching the problem the same way.

I hope that answers your question.

Q It does, and I have many follow-ups. Jack and Andrew, are you guys okay with me continuing?

MR. HOLT: Go ahead.

MR. HOLT: David, if you sneak in a question about the government of Iraq, I'll just sit here and listen.

Q What?

MR. HOLT: If you sneak in a question about the government of Iraq --

Q No, I don't want to sneak in a question. You do that. But let me follow up again.

Sir, that's a pretty big allegation. I mean, it's a pretty serious allegation to accuse Iranian Qods force of training, you know, the Shi'a groups in your AO. I mean, do you have specific intelligence that fingers official Iranian government organs in that role?

COL. LEHR: We have sensitive reporting that indicates it, yes, and that's as far as I'm going to take that.

Q But you're convinced -- I mean, it's one thing to say, you know, they've got EFPS that appear to be machined and may even have been sourced from Iran. And, you know, it's easy to make the connection between Iraqi Shi'as and Iranian Shi'as. But to say that the Iranian government is really behind this, I mean, that's like, you know, smoking-gun kind of, weapons-of-mass-destruction in Iraq kind of allegation. That's a big deal. So you stand by that?

COL. LEHR: I don't believe I said the Iranian government was behind it.

Q Right --

COL. LEHR: I said there's indications that the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps, Qods Force, is involved in the training and resources of the Shi'a extremist groups in my area. I'm not linking the IRGC Qods Force to the Iranian government.

Q Okay, I see. COL. LEHR: I want to make that perfectly clear.

Q Okay. Now, can you go into greater detail on your efforts to eliminate financiers?

COL. LEHR: Besides targeting the leadership, figuring out what the network looks like and then attacking certain key figures. That's about as far as I want to go. We just understand the situation pretty well and use all the resources available to target these guys.

I'd much rather -- I'm a believer in decapitating the head of the beast, taking it off, versus just large massive offensive operations that are not necessarily intelligence-driven. I like being more surgical. I think it involves far less collateral damage. It embraces the concept of proportionality. And it's just -- for a number of reasons, it's the way to go. I just know how I -- one thing that I do understand is the leadership's impact on an organization and when you start taking out key leaders in any organization, be it an extremist organization or be it -- you know, a legitimate organization, it has an impact on the activities of that outfit. And so that's what we're trying to do right now. And financing -- the financiers and the weapons facilitators are just a huge part of this insurgency.

You -- we've heard -- you've heard the adage before -- "You've got to get to the left of the boom." If you lay out an IED cycle starting from international borders, so to speak, conceptually on the left to the explosion on the side of a road on the right, we are constantly seeking to get to the left of that explosion so that we are eliminating the guy that's providing the funds, the guy that's providing the demolitions or the expertise to put into the hands of the in-placer or to lay at the side of the road to kill U.S. soldiers or Iraqi Security Forces.

So we recognize the -- go ahead.

Q Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to interrupt. Will you recognize what?

COL. LEHR: We recognize the fact the finance circles are key to this because of what they can bring to the table with the money. And so we target that, and that was one of our big success stories -- the Batrami (ph) network -- al Qaeda financier network.

Q Now correct me if I'm wrong here, but -- and maybe I have a naive understanding of a cellular organized network -- but it seems that decapitations would sort of lose some of their power if you've got somewhat -- you know, modular, interchangeable, loosely organized cells.

COL. LEHR: Mm-hmm. Well, I don't know how loosely they're organized. I kind of look at it as a spoke of the wheel and the hub is typically the leader of a given cell. And -- but that hub is connected to another hub somewhere, and that -- maybe I'm defining it wrong when I say "cellular network." Spoke of the wheel -- the hub of that wheel is connected to another wheel with a hub and so on and so forth. So we're going after the hub of each one of those wheels and trying to eliminate that.

Now I will concede the point that you take one leader out, they're going to regenerate themselves, but you just keep after it. And here's the indication to me that this thing is working -- this strategy is working. When we first came into the area, the price of an IED in-placer was, I think, \$100. I'm not sure of what time period or event that \$100 -- that's just a point in

time or a metric, so to speak. It -- the price of it is up to over \$500 now over the same time period or event. So that gives you an indication of the effectiveness. It's -- it no longer -- the average goomba that's laying an IED realizes, "Hey, this is serious business. They're killing people out here and they're eliminating the leadership. I'm not going to do this for \$100 anymore. It's going to cost you this amount of money to do it." So that is a huge metric for us to determine how successful we're being.

And -- oh, by the way, the number of events that dropped like I indicated -- I think 80 percent was the figure that I quoted you over the past month.

Q Thank you very much.

MR. HOLT: Okay.

And Andrew, do you have a follow-up?

COL. LEHR: You're welcome.

MR. LUBIN: Yes, I believe I do.

Colonel, to bring it back to more of a macro topic, if -- when your troops leave -- when the soldiers leave, what kind of outreach do you expect or have been getting from the government of Iraq? Everybody we spoke -- we speak to in the past couple of months, the weak link in the surge is the government of Iraq not stepping up and filling the vacuum that you and then the provincial government seem to offer them.

COL. LEHR: I'm sorry. I could not hear your question. I only heard bits and pieces of it, so I can't comment right now. Can you restate that, please?

MR. LUBIN: Yes. That the weak link in the surge strategy seems to be the government of Iraq and the concern would be that if your troops leave with the locals having rogered up and the IEAs and the IEPs doing what they're supposed to be doing, if the government of Iraq doesn't step in to provide the services and money that -- the essential services that they need to, what do you foresee as the possibility of AQI coming back?

COL. LEHR: I need some help from any of the other bloggers. Could somebody else restate the question? I'm having a hard time understanding the question. I'm missing about every other word or every third word. Can somebody restate the question over?

MR. HOLT: Yes, sir, I will. This is Jack.

What Andrew's asking is that the government of Iraq -- what -- how -- what do you foresee as their support once you guys -- once you move on? Will they be able to roger up the support that's needed in the local provincial areas?

COL. LEHR: I can only comment on my area and I would say it will be challenging. Every day is a challenge in terms of connecting the levels of government across essential services and other things like that. I believe I heard something about essential services. What we're doing right now -- part of this is a training process. I see myself as a brigade commander. My

responsibility and area of focus and sphere of influence is at the province level, and I want to facilitate lines of communication -- for lack of better words -- between the province and the next level down, which is the Qada, a kind of a county government level. And then battalion commanders who are subordinate to me pick it up at the Qada level and they reinforce the lines of communication down to the nahia level, which is the city or town. And those are rough terms right there.

So part of it is a coaching and teaching process. It isn't perfect right now. We're overcoming years of bureaucracy in our area. Years of bureaucracy.

It amazes me how they make decisions sometimes, but -- you know, it is what it is based on the environment that they've experienced over the last 25 years. So our -- part of our charter is ensuring them -- or showing them what right looks like and we are making progress daily on this. And I think by the time -- at least in the strategy as I understand it and for my particular area, I think every day, every month and in the next couple quarters, it's going to get better and better. And that's about the only way I can answer that. I think it's getting to the point now that they are almost self-sustaining. Each area's different and I'm only commenting about my own area right now. So I'm very optimistic and encouraged by what I see.

Over.

MR. HOLT: All right, sir. Anything -- anybody else?

Q No, I'm good, thanks.

Q No this is good. Thank you very much.

MR. HOLT: All right. Thank you, sir.

We've got Colonel Jon Lehr, the commander of the Fourth Army Brigade Combat Team --

COL. LEHR: All right.

MR. HOLT: Second Infantry Division, Multinational Division North for the Bloggers' Roundtable today. Thank you, sir, for joining us. Have you got any closing comments for us?

COL. LEHR: Well, yeah, I do.

I'll make a paid political announcement for this organization and I'll say -- I'll go beyond my organization and the Army. The thing that strikes me every day is -- and I have 25-plus years' commissioned service and then some enlisted time -- in my time in the service, I am struck by the quality of the soldiers that are in this Army, and I think they're the finest -- this is the finest Army to ever take the field in my opinion. Every day, we are getting ahead of the enemy as I just described to you, and I won't go into more detail about that. And -- but it goes beyond that. It goes to the other non-lethal activities that are involved in this counterinsurgency -- improving governance, improving the economy, improving the -- their quality of life through essential services. And then the final point that I'll make is these soldiers -- although you hear data points from time to time about, "Well, this unit did this, this soldier did that -- was involved in this atrocity" -- overall this Army and the

soldiers that serve in this Army are serving with honor every day. And it's a true honor and pleasure to be able to lead these men and women. And -- so I am, I'm very, very proud of what they're doing and to be part of it.

So I appreciate your ear, and thanks for some great questions.

MR. HOLT: All right. Thank you, sir -- Colonel Lehr and hopefully we can hear from you again in the future here in a few weeks or so.

Q Yes. And Colonel, thank you --

COL. LEHR: Okay. Well, I look forward to it.

Thank you.

MR. HOLT: Thank you.

Q All right. Thanks for the time this evening.

END.